A Sociolinguistic Study of Hyperbole in Iraqi Arabic

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with hyperbolic expressions as used in Iraqi Arabic everyday conversation (henceforth IA). Such expressions usually pass without challenge by listeners, who accept them as creative intensifications for elevative or effective purposes such as humor or irony, and who often make their own supportive contributions to the figure of speech. The paper attempts an analysis of such expressions from a sociolinguistic perspective. It is usually thought that the linguistic context as well as other metalinguistic factors play a crucial role in the structuring and understanding of tropes.

1. Introduction

Hyperbole is defined as a form of extremity, an exaggeration that either magnifies or minimizes some real state of affairs. (Cano Morn, 2004). It is not intended to be taken literally and it produces ridicule or satire when applied to banal topics. The term goes back to Aristotle, and "features throughout the historiography of rhetoric". (MacCarthy and Carter, 2004 : 15). It implies extravagant exaggeration by which something is represented as much greater or less, better or worse, or involving a greater intensity than in reality, or beyond possibility; a statement exaggerated fancifully through excitement, or for effect.

The relevance of sociolinguistics to foreign language learning is significant when we consider learners who might be situated in target language community; therefore, they must be equivalent with the cultural values that underlie speech acts.

When they talk, IA speakers make their speech full of hyperbole. It is possible to say that they speak with hyperbole.

The study cannot, by definition, be exhaustive since hyperbole may be both conventive and creative and the possibilities for linguistic creativity are infinite; what we shall attempt to do is to illustrate some of the most frequently recurring lexico-grammatical types of hyperbole in every day contexts.

2. Population of the Study

The original homeland of the sample is governorate of Anbar, especially the right side of the Euphrates. They are efficient and skilled agrarian people known for their loyalty and generosity. The majority of these people have low academic backgrounds.

To avoid influence of other dialects spoken by some people who live in Ramadi city, the investigation is limited to people who live in the rural areas extending from Tway village situated on the Euphrates to the west of Ramadi until Al-Muhammadi village about 15 kilometers to the east of Heet and from Buthyab village on the leftside of the Euphrates until Zuwaya village opposite to Al-Muhammadi village. The study also includes the people who live in the village situated to the west of Heet on both sides of the Euphrates which extend for about 15 kilometers. People live near the edge of the desert in Abu-Aljeer, Jubha and Al-Awasil are also included.

3. Hypothesis

1. Hyperboles are often used for certain functions such as emphasis, impressing others, and expressing strong emotions.
2. Hyperbole strategies share objects of oath which are further analysed into various kinds of hyperbole.
3. Hyperbole is often associated with lying, deception and unjustified misinterpretation. It is not meant to be taken literally.

4. Data Collection

Various techniques have been used to collect variable data. The technique adopted for this study is the ethnographic approach which is based on the collection of spontaneous speech in neutral setting. Hymes (1962, 13-53) is a pioneering figure in the use of this method which derives from anthropology. Other researchers have been adopting this technique in their studies, e.g. Mones and Wolfson (1981 : 115-132) on compliments and Holmes (1989 : 114-212) on apologies. Mones and Wolfson support that this approach is the only reliable method for gathering data of speech acts functions in daily interaction.

5. Previous Studies on Hyperbole

Although hyperbole has been since late antiquity, one of the many figures of speech discussed within the general framework of rhetoric, the emphasis has been primarily laid on defining, classifying and illustrating this trope. In contemporary language theories, the paucity of studies addressing hyperbole is most notable, probably because in other disciplines it has been considered a classic trope whose study belongs to that of rhetoric. Thus, no serious attention has been paid to the study of hyperbole in the domain of linguistics, psychology, philosophy or literary criticism. Most of the empirical work on hyperbole involved comparison of frequency and use in different cultures (e.g. Spitzbardt 1963, Cohen 1987, Edelman et al, 1989). Ohlrogge and Tsang (2004) carried out a study on the frequency of hyperbole in academic speech. They questioned whether in academic speech people maintain the careful and cautious tone of academic prose, or whether, in the heat of the spoken moment, they adopt the exaggerations of colloquial speech. A part from these cross-cultural studies, most interest in hyperbole has been almost invariably directed at explaining the psychological processes operating on their understanding, being much of this literature subsumed within studies of verbal irony or theories of humour.

McCarthy and Carter (2004) have argued in favour of a conversational and discourse analysis approach when investigating the role of exaggeration in naturally-occurring speech. Their study reveals that the key recurring items such as listener acceptance token, laughter, and listener’s own further contribution to the emerging hyperbolic context are crucial to the interpretation of hyperboles as joint activities between conversational parteners.

6. The Discussion

Arabic is often described as a language characterized by exaggeration and over-assertion. The examples of hyperbolic expressions cited and analyzed in this study have been collected from authentic data. They come from direct observation of language used in everyday conversation. Although many creative speakers invent new hyperboles according to the needs of the situation, the focus of this study is on conventionalized idiomatic hyperbole expressions.

A large set of hyperbolic expressions are quantifiers expressions that cite a number, measurement terms of weight, length, area ...etc, containers of time units. According to Colstone and Keller (1998), exaggerating about an event or fact that was of greater quantity than expected can stretch to infinity, while an event of lesser quantity or magnitude than expected can stretch only to zero.

Arabic numerals are often used hyperbolically as in /xamsi:n sina/ (fifty years), /mi:t marra/ (hundred times), /sab?i:n marra/ (seventy times), /mit maljo:n marra/, and also percentages like /mijja bilmijja/ (a hundred percent, i.e., perfect) or /miljo:n bilmijja/ (a million percent). Notice how some Arabic hyperbolic numeral expressions can take a number of stresses and repetition, as in /?alf ?alf mabruk/ (Lit. a thousand thousand blessed). Similarly quantative measurement is involved in such hyperbolic expressions as in /ke:lo/ (a kilogram). Similar expressions of quantity expressions are used , /gara:tha bgad izibil/ (Lit. its spare parts are as much as rubbish, i.e. very much

splendid), /ində buti:n wərəq/ (Lit. he has a hill of grands, i.e he is very rich).

Expressions using container items are often used hyperbolically. The expressions /tumtur əbu trebi:ʃa:t/ (it rains heavily). Arabic uses hyperboles with containers /bahr/ (sea), /guwa:ni flu:s/ (sacks of money), /iʃʃa:r? fra:/ (the street became a river, i.e. after rain).

Abstract as well as concrete items are often exaggerated by describing them in terms of piles, such expressions as "loads of " as in /himil zma:le:n/ (two-ass loads), "heaps of" /kwa:m/ /akalu kwa:m zibid/ (The childern ate piles of butter).

Expression exaggerating length of duration include "hours, days, years, centuries, ages" /sa:?a:t/ (hours), /?ajja:m/ (days), /lajja:li/ (nights), /sini:n/ (years) are used, /intidartak sini:n/ (I waited for you for years).

Arabic time expressions sometimes use /jid3i/ and /jisawwi/ (around) or (about) when used hyperbolically /jid3i əʃər marra:t/ (about ten times). Arabic hyperbolic time expressions also sometimes use historical reference, as in /min ?ajjam sajjidna no:h/ (Lit. since the days of Noah, i.e very old) or /wa:?I hifrit ilfra:h/, (Lit. aware of the time when the river was dug, i.e. he is old aged) or /min tʃa:n iddirhim xaʃab/(Lit. when the dime was wood, i.e. very out dated) or /min tʃa:n ittuhu:r ?adh/, (Lit. when the circumcision was a bite, i.e. very out dated).

The idioms "in a minute" or "a second" are all too familiar; they are often used hyperbolically in such utterances as /Ɵa:nija wahda/ "a second" or /ramʃat ?e:n/ "Lit. a blink of an eye, i.e. very swift". All members can be excluded through extreme negation using expressions as "not a soul". Similarly, in Arabic, among inclusive extremes are to be found /kul in na:s/, (all people) or /kul ʃi:), (everything) while among exclusive ones are /əbədan/.

Hyperbolic expressions also use scalar modifiers expressing unwarranted extremes of a value scale. Gradable adjectives and verbs are often used hyperbolically by choosing an extreme point on the scale. These include adjectives that describe size such as "huge and immense". /wallahi tʃibi:ra hə:l/

(Lit. by God it is very huge). Another expression involving intensification is that of suffering, as evidenced by such hyperbolic expressions as "starving", "freezing", " boiling", "dying", /majjit min it-ta?ab/, (Lit. dead from fatigue, i.e. deadly tired), /majjit min ud3d3u?/, (Lit. dead from hunger, i.e. very much hungry), and such verbs as /harra tusmut samut/, (Lit. boiling heat, i.e. it is very hot), /ba:rda tiksir ilxaʃim/, (Lit. it is very cold to a degree of breaking the nose), /inn?imə:t min liqra:jja/, (I went blind with reading). Expressions of approving wonder include "great and /tixabil/", (It drives (one) mad).

Approval is expressed hyperbolically through such expressions as /rahi:b/, (terrifying). This list of verbal and adjectival intensifying expressions is far from been exhaustive.

The superlative form of gradable adjectives expresses the highest point on the scale, as in "newest", "the largest". Arabic counterparts usually specify the set of compared items, as in /?ahsan wa:hid bil?a:jjlal/, (The best member in the family).

Intensifiers are often used to strengthen or emphasize certain elements of the proportion manily adjectives. These include /hə:l/, "very" as in /Ɵgi:l hə:l/, (Lit. very dark (tea), i.e. strong tea), /dalamma hindis/, (very dark (night)), /Ɵgi:l d3i:r/, (very dark (tea) as tar), /itilfizjon safi walla zala:l/, (Lit. the television is very clear as if it were pure water).

Swear words like "hell" are often used as lexical intensifiers, for instance, /ha:rra d3ahanam/, (Lit. it is hot as hell). Swear words usually accompany hyperbolic expressions to highten the degree of anger the speaker entertains for one reason or another. When he insults, reviles, abuses or curses, the speaker intensifies this through the use of hyperbole. Take for example, /kalb wa ibin siti:n kalb/ (Lit. he is a dog and a son of sixty dogs). The rising tone, intonation and heavy stress show how furious the speaker is.

Arabic uses comparison hyperbolically too. Expressions like, /miƟil ilha:ma/, (Lit. like a beast), /ra:sa ras iƟƟo:r/ (lit. his head is like that of an ox, i.e. he has a very big head), /fla:n miƟil ilhu:t/.

Conditionals which include improbable and impossible conditions are often used hyperbolically to indicate the impossibility of the result by very absurd condition and the use of /hatta law/, for example, /ma: intti:kijah hatta law itug/, (Lit. I'll not give it to you even if you are burst), /hatta law jid3 əbu əbu:k/, (Lit. even the father of your father come), /hatta law tumu:t wij saddidun;nak ?ala id3ibbla/, (Lit. even if you die and they direct you (your head) towards the qibla), /walla mainti:kija law jina:gtu:lak/, (Lit. by God I'll never give it to you even if they are dropping water in your mouth at the moment of death)).

Idioms are often hyperbolic in meaning and some of them are culture-specific; /naʃʃaf ri:d3i/, (Lit. he dried my mouth), /əzəjjin Sarbi/, (Lit. I'd cut off my moustache), /law tri:d liban il?asfu:r/ (Lit. even if you apply the yughurt of the sparrow, i.e. to indicate the impossibility since in reality the sparrow would not give yughurt). Hyperbolic idioms based on body parts include; /sajjir d3ild wu?adhum/ (Lit. he is only skin and bone, i.e. he is bony), /igus ðra:?i/, (Lit. I'll cut off my arm). Idioms based on military metaphors include ; /d3ə:s il?grugga/, (Lit. the army of the frog, i.e. very coward). Arabic is also abundant in religious idioms such as; /həra:m ələ:k walla/, (Lit. by God it is taboo).

Hyperbolic expressions can be even further intensified through the use of cognate accusatives like; /jizgur zagar min ilbərid/ (very cold), /ta:jir tə:r/, (Lit. flying, i.e. he was moving very fast), /jiʃug ilga: Sag/, (Lit. he splits the earth), /hlibo:na halib/, (Lit. they milked us, i.e. they took all our money), /igus lisanək gas/, (I'll cut your tongue), /aslax d3ildak salax/, (Lit. I'll skin you), /issaja:ra tiʃrab ilba:nzin ʃirib/, (the car consumes too much gasoline), /jittafir dam ittifir/, (Lit. the wound sprinkles blood), /walla iʃʃi:b d3a:k jitʃəm tʃə?m/, (Lit. by God the valley comes overflooding with rain water). We can extend this list to include other proverbs such as; /jidiwir bid3ə:ba ilqita:r/, (Lit. the train can turn in his pocket, i.e. he is completely bankrupt), /ga?ad ?al hadi:da/, (he became very poor), /irrba?i:n tʃa:rku bzibiba/, (Lit. forty people participted in a grape, i.e. to encourage kindness and generiousity (to indicate the small thing which might be

enough for many people)), /judxul be:n il?asa wigiʃirha/, Lit. he can go between the stick and its skin, i.e. he is midlesome), /hisa jid3i:b ilta:yhi:n/, (Lit. his voice can bring the astray, i.e, his voice is so loud).

7. Findings

The quantitative corpus findings may be summed up as follows;

1. One of the variables to be considered throughout the analysis is the humourous effect of hyperboles. Humour was pointed out as one of the primary goals of exaggeration.
2. The overall findings reflect that the majority of hyperbole occur within the category of size, degree and intensity.
3. Words referring to amounts/quantities were found to be very hyperbole porne. Adjective modification of amounts and numbers were also traced.
4. The numerical quantities are more hyperbole-porne in their plural forms than in their singulars.
5. Mass quatities such as heaps, loads, …etc are very hyperbole-porne.
6. Time expressions such as minutes, hours, years are frequent in hyperbole.
7. A big proportion of hyperbolic expressions are used to express threat. To achieve this end, IA speakers usually accompany their hyperboles with other extalinguistic phonological factors such as body movements, facial expressions, and a very rising intonation.
8. It seems that the frequency of using hyperbolic expressions coincides with the educational status of the interlocutors. The higher the educational status, the lower the frequency of using hyperboles. This fact justifies the high tendency among speakers in our corpus towards using hyperbole as they are generally of low educational status. It agrees with Ohlrogge and Tsang's (2004) finding who conclude their paper saying that "these terms [hyperbolic expressions] primarily occur only in the most informal of occasions …". It is often believed

that exaggerated expressions are misleading and ludicrous, and should therefore be avoided in academic writing.

9. The lexico-grammatical configrations IA speakers use when speaking hyperbolically include; adverbs, which are usually intensifying adverbs, (e.g. absolutely, certainly, very) plus extreme positive adjectives (such as amazing, brilliant) and their collocations (such as absolutely brilliant, just amazing). Sometimes, there are regularly repeated patterned formulae such as (jidan..jidan..jidan, mi:t mara samahta..mi:t mara).
10. As for the high emotions hyperboles arouse, it can safely be said that hyperboles move in a continuum of extremities. They can be manipulated to arouse high laughter, or be used to express threat and anger.

8. Conclusion

In this paper we have traced the interest in hyperbole that is found in everyday conversation. The study is based on a corpus collected authentically from speakers in Anbar Province. The corpus also shows us that hyperboles are not encoded solely in lexico-grammatical items. Syntactic and dicoursal strategies such as repetition and clustering of hyperbolic items suggest that hyperboles need to be examined over turn boundaries. Examination of hyperbole in interactive contexts also underlies the expressive and interpersonal meaning forgrouded in its use : intensification, humour and banter.

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